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PREPARATORY COMMITTEE FOR THE UNITED NATIONS
CONFERENCE ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT
Third session
Geneva, 12 August - 4 September 1991
Item 2 (a)

PREPARATIONS FOR THE UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT ON THE BASIS OF GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTION 44/228 AND TAKING INTO ACCOUNT OTHER RELEVANT GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTIONS

ACTIVITIES OF THE CONFERENCE SECRETARIAT

Report of the Secretary-General of the Conference

Status Report on National Report Preparations

As an elaboration of the brief comments concerning national reports in document A/CONF.151/PC/41 this paper is intended to brief the participants at this session regarding the latest situation concerning national report preparations.

As of 23 August the UNCED secretariat has received 40 national reports submitted to us either officially through a government channel or through the UNDP Resident Representative's office in the country concerned. Some of the reports received are draft reports, still subject to formal government approval. Governments have nevertheless made available to the secretariat drafts to indicate that preparations at the national level are almost complete.

In addition, some 50 countries have indicated that their reports will be arriving late, mostly in September and October. A few reports will arrive later than end October. The remaining 80 or so countries have not responded to date or provided any up-to-date information regarding national report preparations, although in many cases the secretariat had been advised that national reports are being prepared.

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The secretariat has not had time to analyse the reports received so far in any detail since the deadline for submission was 31 July. It appears, however, that in many countries a fair amount of work has gone into the preparations. Indeed a number of countries have informed us that the preparatory process itself, often involving people from all walks of life, has been most rewarding. Most Governments have appointed inter-ministerial committees, often called UNCED Preparatory Committees, consisting of anywhere between a handful of ministries up to some 15-20 ministries and government departments. Often these committees include the private sector, non-governmental organizations, citizens organizations, religious and other interest groups. At least 50 per cent of the reports received so far show an active involvement of non-governmental organizations. This figure may be higher since it is not always obvious from the report to what extent NGOs have participated. A more careful review of the reports will be carried out. In the majority of reports so far received, the ministry responsible for environment has acted as secretariat or report preparing ministry, although in a number of countries the ministry responsible for foreign affairs has acted as the chairing ministry.

The number of reports received from developing countries, especially those in Africa, in comparison with developed countries, to date is very encouraging. No doubt this is a reflection of the active support provided by the UNDP field offices and by the United Nations Sudano-Sahelian Office. In the Pacific the support from the Asian Development Bank is of particular importance.

The secretariat expects a number of reports to arrive during the current session of the Preparatory Committee and based on oral indications, some Governments intend to bring their reports to the plenary.

The relatively high proportion of late reports and non-respondents is of concern to the secretariat because of the real time-limits imposed on the secretariat for preparing analyses and reports to the Preparatory Committee at its fourth session to be held in New York. A number of countries have also responded to the secretariat's request and provided the reports on diskette.

An informal list of countries, which have submitted their reports or given indications of the report submission date, has been circulated separately and delegations that have not responded are urged to inform the secretariat about the status of their reports.

Analysis of reports

The secretariat had expected national reports to be of approximately 100 pages although no specific guidelines were given in this regard. The bulk of reports so far received range between 90 and 250 pages. Thus if the average national reports stays around 150-200 pages and all States submit reports, the analysis process will include some 25-30,000 pages. This figure is twice as high as expected and the secretariat may have to re-evaluate the analysis process and the time needed for it.

The UNCED secretariat believes that it has the primary responsibility to carry out the initial analysis of the reports in preparing a synoptic report for the next session of the Preparatory Committee in March 1992. At present the secretariat is being assisted by a handful of young analysts in this exercise. Sectoral information will, of course, be reviewed by sectoral specialists as required. Thematic or regional reports as needed by the Preparatory Committee with significant inputs from national reports could also be prepared. Here the secretariat envisages using its own expertise and that of the Working Groups that have assisted the secretariat with the preparation of technical documents, as well as possibly other organizations in the United Nations system and outside as appropriate.

The secretariat is planning to use a software programme for full text computer storage of national reports. The intention is to index all national reports using a standard vocabulary of search words based on General Assembly resolution 44/228, the guidelines for national reports, A/CONF.151/PC/8 and Add.1, as well as Agenda 21 documents presented at this meeting. This indexing will allow the secretariat to easily extract information from national reports on all relevant topics. The programme is flexible and adjustable and will also allow for search by individual key words of whatever nature they may be. This search facility should greatly assist the staff of the secretariat to prepare any specific papers updated with inputs from national reports that the Preparatory Committee may request for its fourth session. This software programme will also allow for cross-sectoral issues to be retrieved with ease.

At an appropriate time the national reports will become part and parcel of UNCED's information system and will therefore be accessible through electronic networks. Separate audio-visual presentations of the UNCED Agenda 21 information system, including the national report system, have been scheduled during this session of the Preparatory Committee.

Future use

At its fourth session the Preparatory Committee also needs to address and make recommendations on how national report data and other data should be treated in the future. As part of the Agenda 21 discussion on institutional follow-up, the secretariat will endeavour to prepare specific recommendations as to how the process, started as part of national report preparations, should continue to benefit countries as they prepare future development plans. The number of positive comments from delegations about the actual process of preparing national reports make the secretariat believe that this national level multi-disciplinary, multi-sectoral process is worth further consideration and support in order to build on the sustainable development process at national, regional and global levels into the next century.